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ABSTRACT

When elementary school teachers serve on a committee to select a new basal reader program, they must represent their school's unique needs. To develop their awareness, the selection committee should address such questions as: What kind of program improvements are teachers hoping to get? What kind of articulation will be needed between this program and a succeeding one? What is the district policy on reading? What are the community values with regard to reading? What type of program has the staff been teaching and for how long have they been teaching it? What are the overall characteristics of the students for whom the program is intended? and What general conclusions do test data suggest? By the time a final selection of a reading program nears, the teachers will have developed a rationale for making a change. Then the committee has to answer a second set of questions on the changes required by the new program and the impact of these changes on various groups. Such questions might include the following: How will this selection improve the program? Will there be a consistency with what the students have learned in the old program? Will teachers need retraining? How expensive will this program be to maintain? How will this program affect parents? and Do faculty members believe that they have had adequate participation in the change of program? By answering these questions, teachers may significantly increase general satisfaction with their basal reader selection. (HOD)

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WHAT TO DO TILL THE BOOK SALESMEN COME
OR
MAKING BASAL READER ADOPTIONS WORK

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WHAT TO DO TILL THE BOOK SALESMEN COME

OR

MAKING BASAL READER ADOPTIONS WORK

When elementary teachers are asked to serve on a committee to select a new basal reader program for the school or school district, they are being asked to take on a formidable responsibility. The decisions they make will affect how they and their colleagues teach reading for whatever time elapses before the next adoption--perhaps as much as ten years. Even more significantly, given the importance of reading to educational success, the effectiveness of the instructional methods and materials they select will have a profound effect on the educational future of the students taught in their school or school district during those years. Most teachers are fully aware of the sizable responsibility they are assuming. Why, then, do the decisions made by these carefully selected groups of competent, responsible teachers so often fail to please their peers? What is it that happens so that within a few months of a textbook adoption, scarcely a single teacher will admit to having served on the committee?

It may be that this unhappy situation results not from the decisions made by the committee, but rather from some important omissions in the procedures used to arrive at those decisions. If the procedures do not provide for it, two important sets of questions may not get answered and the answers utilized to produce a more successful adoption.

One important set of questions needs to be answered before the committee begins its review of the various basal reader programs. The answers to these questions make it possible for the

committee to develop its own unique perspective with regard to the materials being reviewed.

Before discussing the specific nature of these questions, it may be well to consider by whom the questions should be answered. Teachers who feel perfectly comfortable in selecting materials for their individual classrooms, may feel less certain about making school or district-wide choices, and may look to the book salesmen with their wider experience of textbook selection, for guidance. Certainly, book salesmen serve a valuable, educational role in the book selection process. They generally inform the committee regarding much of current thought. They often provide a wide knowledge of what other school districts are doing. In addition, they usually have an excellent sense of the areas about which teachers are most concerned. Nontheless, they are salesmen whose primary function is to sell. They bring with them an astonishing array of sophisticated marketing techniques. When the committee turns to them prematurely, without having developed its own perspective, it may be looking to the salesmen not only to answer questions, but to formulate them as well. When this happens, the committee may never be fully in control of the types of information it will acquire, and thus may never quite assume the role it was intended to assume.

The perspective which the committee needs to develop before considering commercial reading programs, is a perspective which will uniquely represent the school or school district the committee serves. Examples of categories and types of questions that

may need to be answered so that the committee can develop such a perspective are outlined below, as are possible sources from which responses may be obtained.

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED BEFORE REVIEWING MATERIALS

Questions Pertaining to Program

1. Is this a K-6 program, or part of a K-12 program? What, if any, reading instruction will follow the program chosen? What kind of articulation will be needed between this program and a succeeding one?

   Source: Appropriate School District Personnel

2. Are all grade levels equal? Are there particular weaknesses to be overcome in various levels of the present program? Are there strengths at the various levels that ought to be retained?

   Source: Appropriate School District Personnel

3. What kinds of program improvement are teachers hoping to get? Aids to indi· dualization? Seatwork ideas?

   Source: Survey of Teachers

4. What strengths or weaknesses of basal programs in general are revealed by current literature in the field?

   Source: Consultant

Questions Pertaining to the School District

1. What is the district policy with regard to reading?

What is its philosophy? What are its goals and objectives?

2. How important is cost? Are there school district priorities?

Source: Administrators

Questions Pertaining to the Community

1. How diverse is the community?
2. What are the community values with regard to reading?
3. What are the community concerns with regard to reading?

Source: Survey of the Community

Questions Pertaining to the Staff

1. What are the overall characteristics of the teachers who will be expected to use the new program? What is the general level of academic preparation in the area of reading instruction? What is the average experience level?
2. What type of program has the staff been teaching, and for how long have they been teaching it?

Source: Survey of Teachers

Questions Pertaining to the Students

1. What are the overall characteristics of the students

for whom the program is intended? What is their language background? What is their experiential background? What is their motivation toward reading instruction?

Source: Survey of Teachers

2. What general conclusions do achievement test or other test data suggest?

Source: Test Results

By the time a final selection of a reading program nears, the teachers on the committee will have developed a clear rationale for making a change of program. This rationale is unlikely to be as clear to teachers who have not served on the committee. These teachers may not readily see the values to be gained through a difficult change process. If this gap is not carefully considered, some teachers may focus solely on the change aspect, and virtually ignore the values so important to the committee.

Thus, there is a second set of important questions to be answered at this time. These questions relate to the changes that will be required by the new program and to the impact of these changes upon the various groups affected by them. The answers to many of these questions will need to be made known to the administration early so that feedback may be given to the committee. This will also provide an opportunity for appropriate school personnel to consider plans to minimize some of

the difficulties or to make them acceptable to the affected groups.

Examples of the kinds of questions that may need to be answered at this time are offered below.

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED AS THE COMMITTEE NEARS A DECISION

Questions Pertaining to Program

1. How will this selection improve the program?
2. What is the degree of change that will be required? How different are the instructional methods to be used from those that have been used in the previous program? How different are the materials?
3. Can teacher-made materials from the old program still be used?
4. Will the new program alter the daily operation of the classroom?
5. Will the new program require changes in informal as well as formal instruction?

Questions Pertaining to Students

1. How will this program help students?
2. Will there be a consistency with what the students have learned in the old program? Will there be gaps the teacher will be expected to fill?
3. Is the language of instruction different? Will the

students have difficulty fitting old ideas into new terminology?

Questions Pertaining to the School District

1. Will teachers need re-training? How would it best be provided? How much will it cost?
2. How expensive will this program be to maintain?
3. If teacher-made materials from previous years are not compatible with the new program, what will this mean in terms of increased cost for duplicating materials, tagboard, etc.?

Questions Pertaining to the Community

1. How will this program affect parents? Will some things be taught at different grade levels than before? Will parents understand why? Are there any departures from traditional understanding?
2. Will parents be able to help their child with reading in the same ways, or should they use different terminology or have different expectations?

Questions Pertaining to Teachers

1. Do faculty members believe that they have had adequate participation in the change of program? Have their concerns been voiced and considered?
2. Will the faculty fully understand what gains are hoped for from the new program?
3. Are the reasons for changes that will require extra work

from teachers likely to be understood?

4. Will the degree of change seem reasonable? If not, what can be done to change this perception?

Answering these and other similar questions cannot guarantee a basal reader adoption free from controversy. Doing so, however, may significantly reduce the numbers of those who are seriously displeased with it. Developing a district or school perspective rather than a book salesmen's perspective from which to view programs may result in the selection of a program that is more appropriate to the situation, and for whose benefits, teachers may be more willing to accept difficult changes. Determining and communicating to admistrators early the impact the change of program will have on various groups may result in the formulation of a plan by which the new program can more successfully be implemented. Thus, the committee may produce members who will be able to experience pride and satisfaction in the accomplishment of a difficult task, not only at the conclusion of that task, but in the years to come as well.

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